
2 The Self-Aware Organizer

We hate our enemies
to provide ourselves in advance
with excuses for possible failure.
Only when we give up
the comforts of pessimism
the luxury of enemies
the sweetness of helplessness
can we see beyond our own doubts.

Paul Williams (1982)

Sociologists and social psychologists have noted that social movements have a transformative effect on people's identities (Yang, 2000). Social change work helps participants break free from certain structural constraints and offers them the power and freedom to reconfigure themselves and society. Identity in this case is not just about personal identity, but it can be also understood as a collective identity, which is an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection to a group or organization. Collective identity is constructed in three ways: (a) through the formation of boundaries that differentiate group members from nongroup members, (b) through the advancement of consciousness as a group with common interests as compared with the larger social order, and (c) through negotiation of novel ways of thinking and acting (Taylor & Whitter, 1992, cited in Staggenborg, 2005). When people are part of a social change organization, they have the opportunity to experience a unique culture and norms that may be distinct from the larger society. This experience of having membership in a social group with shared values can offer organizers a sense of self-definition and solidarity.

Besides addressing the existential aspects of organizing, this chapter focuses on the emotional life of organizers. By inquiring into potential emotional pitfalls that organizers often face, greater clarity about the inner life of organizers can be attained. Here I give special attention to considerations and techniques for working with such emotional and psychical complexity.

THE CALL OF ORGANIZING

People become inspired to organize for a plethora of reasons. These inspirations may include personal or familial experiences with hardship, transformative encounters with organizers, and generalized anger with "the system." What seems to be true for all activists, though, is that social change work gives meaning to their lives. Research has shown that practitioners often engage in social justice work due to their existential commitments (Buchbinder, 2007). Rather than falling into despair and apathy, many people organize out of a sense of hopefulness and sense of responsibility. This meaning is often related to an organizer's identity, which has personal, collective, and spiritual dimensions. In a recent study of community organizers and advocates in post-Katrina New Orleans, I asked these committed practitioners what significance organizing had for them in their lives (Pyles, 2006). They offered a variety of responses that touched on themes related to their indi-

- "I'm the type of person that I would do for others before I do for myself. I always prided myself in as opportunities and doors open for myself that's the reason why they open for me is to open them for someone else. What one of the main reasons why planning and helping the devastated neighborhoods revitalize themselves is that ... one of my callings is to help people."
- "My personality I think fits in. I like to do things that are going to benefit somebody. With my agricultural background, with my personality, my comfort in meeting people and explaining—and I guess you would say selling ideas, even—and with media, it fits well for me."

The following quotation reflects the sense of collective identity centered on social justice and freedom and fostered by participation in an organization:

It means freedom, it means justice, it means home and it means community to me. In everything we do, we engage the community. It means community to me, and that's what the community means to me. Being a part of [my organization] means action. You can be a community organizer with anybody but in this organization movement has to occur and it does occur. I'm very appreciative of the fact that it occurs and that it occurs frequently. There's a lot of movement.... It means political freedom. It means that you are no longer bound by what you don't feel can happen. You're not tied up in "It will never happen." Maybe it will take a lot. "I wonder who's going to do it, who's going to do what." That's a cage. That's imprisonment. "I wonder what's going to happen." Just kind of squatting on the sidelines, "I wonder what's going to happen." You're free from that cage of, "I don't know, and I can't affect anything and I'm stuck in this box." That's a tremendous freedom. You're free from the whole stereotypical image of a low to moderate income person. You're free from that, and that's a big freedom. You're free from apathy and free from all of those things. Like I said, that's a little box. If you have to sit and wait for something to happen or wonder what's going to happen or wonder who's going to take action on something, you're imprisoned because you're stuck right in that spot. You can't do anything.

Finally, these quotations highlight an existential or spiritual perspective:

- "We're really transforming the world by engaging in this endeavor.... Abraham Maslow talked about self-actualization. I think the class struggle is where you achieve self-actualization."
- "I'm a very spiritual guy. I'm not a very religious man, but I believe in, you do things on this earth that you're supposed to do, help one another.... And my understanding of Native American culture is that's the way they are. Everything is spirituality. And I think it's pretty fascinating, and that's how I feel about it. I felt a calling. This is what I had to do."

When people think of community organizing, they sometimes have a romantic view that can easily become distorted. Images of extraordinary figures such as Mahatma Gandhi or Nelson Mandela come to mind. Because these are such unique and inspiring people, one may believe that one could never measure up to such standards and thus see community organizing is a path for a different type of person. For this reason, I think it is necessary that one have a more realistic picture of who community organizers are and what it is exactly that they do. We live in a society that practices the worship of heroes, where movie stars, athletes, and religious figures are held in the highest esteem. When we view those heroes as better than us, looking outside of ourselves for strength, we are

Students who first enter the field of community practice are often puzzled and disappointed when they find themselves doing what appear to be mundane tasks—coordinating meetings and events, making phone calls, sending e-mails, creating flyers, collecting surveys, holding focus groups. This work is not nearly as romantic as being in a historic demonstration or speaking to the United Nations, which is often the impression that people have of community organizing. Consider, instead, that the beauty, meaning, and ultimately the success of organizing exists in the seemingly mundane details of everyday organizing practice.

CONNECTING THE PERSONAL AND POLITICAL

When someone's consciousness is first heightened about oppression and the possibilities of liberation, it is a significant moment in a person's life. Many people find that they immediately are compelled to connect this political awareness to situations in their personal lives. They must act a certain way, live a certain lifestyle, spend time with particular people, dress a certain way, ad infinitum. Trying to fit one's life into an ideological framework is not only impossible, but not necessarily even desirable; humans and their social lives are much too contradictory and messy for that. But, nonetheless, a certain awareness and desire for personal change is inevitably and appropriately sparked. Activist Samuel Kass (Berger, Boudin, & Farrow, 2005) had this experience:

I have found living my life in a way that is consistent with my values to be the most challenging aspect of activism. Our everyday life. Time. Money. Energy. Classes. Groups we participate in. What we read. Clothes we wear. The food we eat. All will not be perfect, and we are often forced to make trade-offs, but we must be aware of and consider every aspect of our life. (p. 188)

For some organizers, the relationship between the personal and political can never be separate. For a lesbian woman who lives in a heteronormative world in a same-sex relationship, her personal reality is always in political dissonance to the mainstream culture. Other organizers proactively seek ways in which they can make their personal lives commensurate with their political leanings. From a transformative organizing perspective, actualizing one's ideals in everyday life is a necessary condition for social change. This can be expressed through a variety of lifestyle choices, such as housing, food, clothing, and transportation. It can also be reflected in the way one chooses to interact with people, emphasizing nonexploitative, horizontal, and compassionate relations.

By choosing to live in a developing country or inner city with limited resources, an activist may consciously create a lifestyle that is in solidarity with people who are suffering the most from damaging economic and social policies and practices. Indeed, historically, living in solidarity with the oppressed has been a social change tactic engaged in by the likes of Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Jane Addams, and many others. The Settlement House movement was an attempt to invoke this kind of solidarity as a social change strategy. However, it is important that one not fool oneself into thinking that he or she can completely understand the suffering of a homeless person if one has not personally been homeless. Humans are not all affected equally by everything in the world (Gottlieb, 1999). Most organizers have a warm bed to go home to at night. This is, of course, a good thing because being able to have one's basic needs met is more or less a necessary condition to engage in social change work.

organizers may at one time or another encounter—anger, fear, despair, burnout, and co-optation. At the end of the chapter, I offer some analysis and remedies for working with them.

ANGER

Anger has always been an emotion that has fueled social movements throughout history. It is a normal feeling that stems from the witnessing of suffering. Upon experiencing suffering, whether personally or by other people, many individuals critically evaluate the suffering and find themselves not just experiencing the emotion of sadness or grief, but feeling outrage at a situation that could be otherwise. Anger and the possibility of confrontation can be scary prospects for many people; indeed, the avoidance of anger seems to be a significant reason why some people do not engage in social change work. People's comfort with scenarios that include tension, hostility, and conflict will likely depend on how anger was expressed in one's family and/or one's cultural or ethnic tradition. Anger also has a gendered component in the sense that society seems to encourage men to experience this emotion (though not necessarily in healthy ways), while, for women, society tends to discourage the expression of anger in any way. Thus, it only makes sense that these and other various dimensions of anger would play themselves out in community organizing practice.

Saul Alinsky believed that discord and confrontation are necessary conditions for social change (Alinsky, 1971). Alinsky and many other organizers have argued that confrontation is a necessary condition for change. This confrontation seems to be accompanied inevitably by anger. When Cortes went through training with the IAF (Industrial Areas Foundation), he gained tremendous insight into himself. He said: "I had a tendency to jump down people's throats, which could intimidate people.... I learned not to allow my anger to get so vociferous, to get more focused.... I learned the value of listening" (in Boyte, 1984, p. 131). Clearly, working with anger in a self-aware manner is a vital practice presenting a tremendous opportunity for progressive community organizers.

Avoiding anger, pretending it does not exist, or being afraid of it will not help organizers. If one avoids anger, then injustices themselves are denied. If one indulges in the anger, one will not be an effective organizer. According to Gottlieb (1999): "It is the inability to be in the presence of our anger, not anger itself, which so often provokes uncontrolled violence, bitter revenge, or the loss of peace of mind" (p. 175). It is tempting to stew in righteous anger. While anger is justified and useful because it stems from an acknowledgment of injustice and propels people to organize, it can also be a hindrance to completely being present and understanding a person, a policy, or a situation.

Anger is nothing to be afraid of, and it can be very useful in certain contexts. In some situations, it might be better to consider delivering messages in creative ways. Sometimes people can hear a message more clearly when it is not presented in a hostile manner; sometimes people only hear the anger and cannot hear the message itself because of their own issues with anger. Because many people do not know how to be with anger and be okay with it, they may avoid the content of a message and only be engaged in the negative energy. A sophisticated organizer has the opportunity to work with these emotions in powerful and transformative ways. Saul Alinsky (1946) once said: "If radicals are stormy and fighting on the outside, inside they possess a rare inner peace. It is that tranquility that can come only from consistency of conscience and conduct."

FEAR

Fear is another emotion that can overwhelm organizers. It is a significant barrier that prevents many

they might be, has anything on you. You've got to figure them out and then you can play in that ballpark. Deal with fear in such a way that you can be clear in any situation. (Perkins in Szakos & Szakos, 2007, p. 95)

There are innumerable fears that organizers confront in the course of their work—a fear of speaking in public, a fear of crowds, a fear of angry people, a fear of people in authority. Others may find themselves afraid of engaging in a one-on-one conversation with a constituent and asking her or him to join an organization or participate in an action. These organizers may be afraid of being rejected, judged, or retaliated against. These fears are all normal, and paying attention to them is the most important course of action one can take. In addition, organizers can talk to colleagues, engage in rituals or spiritual practices, and in some cases seek outside professional help.

DESPAIR

The far-reaching impacts of social injustice across the globe can feel overwhelming and can easily propel people into states of despair. Poverty, discrimination, violence, and disease can all seem like too much to bear and certainly too much to do anything about. Feeling and thinking about these issues can engender feelings of powerlessness and despair. Despair can turn into hopelessness and even cynicism. Gottlieb (1999) discusses this phenomenon with regard to the barriers faced by environmental activists:

Because the engines of environmental destruction are strong, entrenched, and often mighty rich, and because ... we carry conflicting obligations, time pressures, and simple fatigue, it often seems easier or safer not to resist. Thus if we are to act, we will need to overcome the temptations of fear or laziness, of complacency and habit. These temptations, as I know very well from my own life, are continual. (p. 166)

Community organizing can be an overwhelming and confusing practice. Krill (1978) discusses how he felt in the 1960s when organizing was heightened across issues including war, poverty, and race. He writes:

Those years were exciting but also puzzling. If one found some ways to engage in radical protest, one felt some relief. Yet it never quite seemed that one was sufficiently involved, and change efforts too often seemed like some kind of predetermined scenario. Despite dramatic efforts, little seemed to change. When there was a change it appeared that new problems, equally bad, replaced the old ones. One seemed deluged with "shoulds" and "oughts" concerning one's professional mission. Yet one remained bewildered as to what to do, where to start, how far to extend oneself. (p. 175)

Nevertheless, successful organizers have structures and tried-and-true practices for achieving success. In addition, progressive organizers can create spaces to attend to these complex emotions and concerns. The issue of despair, like many of the emotional perils confronted by organizers, is not something that is necessarily addressed at one point in time and then never to be seen again; it is an ongoing component of social change work. Environmental organizer Joanna Macy conducts workshops for activists wanting formal practices that can help them work with this sense of despair.

BURNOUT

One of Alice Walker's (1976) early novels, *Meridian*, tells the story of activists in Mississippi during the civil rights movement. Walker recounts personal narratives of organizing work touching on themes such as the racism and sexism within the movement, the physical and psychological toll of organizing, and romantic love between activists. She writes about the emotional effects that organizing has on people's lives:

Later that summer, after another demonstration, she saw him going down a street that did not lead back to the black part of town. His eyes were swollen and red, his body trembling, and he did not recognize her or even see her. She knew his blankness was battle fatigue. They all had it. She was as weary as anyone, so that she spent a good part of her time in tears ... whatever she was doing—canvassing, talking at rallies, tying her sneakers, laughing. (p. 82)

Organizing can bring up a variety of emotions, ones that may appear in other realms of people's lives and ones that can only emerge from the daily grind of organizing practice. The "battle fatigue" of organizing is experienced by many practitioners and can manifest by negatively impacting people's physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Burnout can affect an organizer's intimate relationships with partners, children, family, and friends.

Researchers have noted the differences between burnout and compassion fatigue (Figley, 2002). Compassion fatigue is a condition that is the result of continuous contact with people who are suffering. Burnout happens to practitioners often as the result of environmental, particularly workplace, conditions that are antithetical to well-being. Thus, not only are personal self-care habits important for mediating burnout, organizational mechanisms may be even more important. Organizational mechanisms are value-oriented policies and practices, particularly those that provide organizers the opportunity to have a say in their working conditions.

CO-OPTATION

Organizers are often at great risk for being co-opted by the power of the social structures that they seek to change. When this happens, organizers inadvertently may assimilate into an established group or institution whose interests and values may be at odds with those the organizers were originally struggling for. It is not uncommon for this to happen, and there are a variety of situations that can trigger co-optation. It is easy to see why organizers could succumb to or align with people or policies that support the status quo. Association with the status quo can result in money, prestige, security, and other opportunities for an organization or for the organizer himself or herself.

Of course, this perspective on co-optation assumes that the interests of corporations, social systems, and institutions are separate from those of communities. Based on a Marxist historical analysis, for example, these interests certainly are quite distinct. On the other hand, such conflicts between the oppressed and oppressors are certainly social constructions that could be otherwise. From the perspective of a consensus-oriented approach to organizing, there is always common ground or shared values. But, how does one balance the risk of co-optation and the opportunities to negotiate or reach consensus with the people who hold power? This can be balanced through values-clarification at the personal and organizational level. The final section offers some additional

to an organizer's social change journey. When nurtured, these qualities can enhance not only one's personal power and well-being, but they also can facilitate a community organizing practice that is sustainable over time. While there are many qualities that are important for organizing, I propose three that are most essential to pursue—persistence, clarity, and joy.

PERSISTENCE

If one analyzes major social reform and social change victories in history and across the globe, most organizers would say the secret to their success was persistence. In the face of anger, fear, and despair, the key is not to give up. It is important to recognize that real results always entail a significant commitment of time, energy, and resources. While there certainly are small victories, including moments of opening, consciousness-raising, and empowerment (and these are never to be underestimated or devalued), social change and other reform-oriented victories are fairly elusive. For some organizers, their ultimate goals may never be achieved in their own lifetime. If one is not prepared for this long journey, one may not be prepared to do social change work.

A Zen Buddhist *koan* (a teaching question or paradox) asks: "How do you go straight up a mountain with ninety-nine curves?" (Glassman, 1998). The answer is that one has to take every curve as it comes—every systemic flaw, every victim-blaming legislator, every racist planning commission. Taking every curve includes being present and gentle with one's self and one's colleagues in times of confusion, hopelessness, and apathy. Fostering a persistent community organizing practice requires self-awareness and attention to the rugged terrain of emotional perils. Supportive organizational environments and nurturing self-care plans can enable practitioners to persist through difficulties.

CLARITY

To gain clarity about organizing contexts, it is necessary to pay attention to evidence that is constantly shifting. This clarity is achieved not just by observation, but through critical reflection grounded in a power analysis that questions the social constructions of economic policies, social welfare programs, and institutions. It is necessary to seek this clarity every day. When one gets up in the morning and feels stiff even though one might have done some yoga stretches the day before, one has to begin anew and get the kinks worked out. Just as one might strive for a kind of clarity with one's body every day, so too a community organizing practice requires daily and even moment-to-moment maintenance. Everyone has blind spots or kinks to be worked out. Making the most of supportive resources can facilitate this clarity. These resources include personal resources and resources within communities and organizations, including allies.

The Quaker tradition has developed a process known as the Clearness Committee to enhance clarity in important decision making. The method is based on the idea that everyone has innate wisdom and that this wisdom can be illuminated through the help of a group of people who offer compassionate, undivided attention. This group poses questions to the seeker rather than offering advice. Integrating similar practices can be efficacious for organizations and facilitate clarity about confusing situations that require action.

Joy

Attending to the pain and suffering of the communities in this world can seem like pretty grim

was valued. She said, "I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody's right to beautiful, radiant things."

Sometimes social change work can appear to be quite linear—getting funding, identifying issues, developing a tactical plan, engaging in actions, evaluating actions, and then on to the next issue. This approach can unfortunately block out creative and innovative ideas that can influence organizing. Thus, making space for art and creativity in social change work is very important. Shepard (2005) has highlighted the "interrelations of joy, justice, pleasure and a use of culture as an organizing tool" (p. 435). This creativity and joy has been a hallmark of organizing in post-Katrina New Orleans. The strength of the culture has fueled community redevelopment, including celebrations such as Mardi Gras and second-line parades, neighborhood festivals, and various forms of art such as dance, painting, and street theater.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What are your personal motivations for engaging in and learning about social change and community organizing?
2. Talk to someone who is doing community organizing as a full-time job. What does a typical day look like? What does he or she love most about the job? What is most challenging about his or her job?
3. Discuss how you have dealt with anger in your life. What are some useful techniques that can help you work with anger when doing social-change work?
4. Why might some people be more vulnerable to burnout in community organizing than other people? What do you think are the factors that can prevent burnout?
5. Discuss the organizer's existential path to meaning and success, i.e., persistence, clarity, and creativity/joy. How might these qualities be relevant to your work? What are some other qualities that might be helpful for organizers to cultivate?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER INQUIRY

BOOKS

- Berger, D., Boudin, C., & Farrow, K. (2005). *Letters from young activists: Today's rebels speak out*. New York: Nation Books.
- Dass, R., & Gorman, P. (1985). *How can I help? Stories and reflections on service*. New York: Knopf.
- Rosenberg, M. B. (2004). *The heart of social change: How to make a difference in your world*. Encinitas, CA: Puddledancer Press.
- Szakos, K. L., & Szakos, J. (2007). *We make change: Community organizers talk about what they do—and why*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Zinn, H., & Arnove, H. (2004). *Voices of a people's history*. New York: Seven Stories.

WEB

- Idealist.org. <http://www.idealists.org>
- National Organizers Alliance. <http://noacentral.org>
- Re-Evaluation Counseling. <http://www.rc.org>
- Transformation Central. <http://www.transformationcentral.org>
- Wiser Earth. <http://www.wiserearth.org>

KEY TERMS

- Burnout:** In contrast to *compassion fatigue* (which happens as a result of bearing witness to suffering), burnout happens to individuals working in organizations and movements that do not attend to an organizer's personal, emotional, and spiritual needs and realities.
- Collective identity:** The shared emotional, cognitive, and moral connections that organizers experience in relation to other social movement and organizational participants.
- Co-optation:** A term used in conflict-oriented organizing that explains how organizers can lose their path when tempted by the rewards of allying with those in power.
- Existential commitment:** The view that organizing represents a person's ongoing individual quest for meaning in life, whereby dedication to social change becomes a way to overcome feelings of personal and social meaninglessness and helplessness.
- Personal is political:** A term coined during the second wave of the women's movement to emphasize the idea that what happens in a person's personal life, such as intimate partner violence, has political dimensions to it.